

The Indifference of the Miller of Hofbrau

BY ANTHONY HOPE.

There is a swift little river running by the village of Hofbrau, and on the river is a mill kept in the days of King Rudolf the Third, by a sturdy fellow who lived there all alone. The king knew him, having alighted at his house for a draught of beer as he rode hunting; and it was of him the king spoke when he said to the queen: "There is, I believe, but one man in the country whom Osra could not love, and that is the miller of Hofbrau." But, though he addressed the queen, it was his sister at whom he aimed the speech. The princess herself was sitting by, and when she heard the king's words she said:

"In truth, I do not desire to move any man. What but trouble comes of it? Yet who is this miller?"

The king told her where the miller might be found, and he added: "If you convert him to the love of woman, you shall have the finest bracelet in Streslau."

"There is nothing, sire, so remote from my thoughts or desire, as to convert your miller," said Osra scornfully. And in this, at the moment, she spoke truthfully; but being left alone for some days at the Castle of Zenda, which is but a few miles distant from Hofbrau, she found time hanging very heavily on her hands; indeed, she did not know what to do with herself for weariness, and so, for this reason, and none other at all, one day she ordered her horse and rode off with a single groom into the forest. Coming, as the morning went on, to a wide road, she asked the groom where it led to. "Hofbrau, madam," he answered. "It is not more than a mile further on," Osra waited for a few moments; then she said: "I will ride on and see the miller, for I have been told that he is pretty. Wait here till I return." And she rode on, smiling a little, and with a delicate tint of color in her cheeks. Before long she saw the river, and the mill on the river, and, coming to the mill, she saw the miller sitting before his door, smoking a long pipe, and she called out to him, asking him to sell her a glass of milk.

"You can have it for the asking," said the miller. He was a good looking, fair fellow, and wore a scarlet cap. There is a pall of it just inside the door behind me. Yet he did not rise, but lay there, idling luxuriously in the sun. For he did not know Osra, never having been to Streslau in his life, and to Zenda three or four times only, and this time the princess was not there. Moreover, though she must be allowed, is not to the purpose he had sworn never again to go so far afield.

Being answered in this manner, and at the same time desiring the milk, the Princess had no choice but to dismount. This she did, and passed by the miller, pausing a moment to look at him with her curious eyes, which flashed from under the brim of her wide rimmed, feathered hat; but the miller blinked lazily up at the sun and took no heed of her.

Osra passed, and found the pail. She poured up a cup of milk and drank it. Then, refilling the cup, she carried it to the miller.

"Will you not have some?" said she, with a smile.

"I was too lazy to get it," said the miller, and he held out his hand, but did not otherwise change his position. Osra's brow was puckered, and her cheek flushed as she knelt down, holding the cup of milk so that the miller could reach it. He took and drained it, gave it back to her, and put his pipe in his mouth again. Osra sat down by him and watched him. He puffed and blinked away, never so much as looking at her.

"What have you for dinner?" asked she presently.

"A piece of cold pie," said he.

"There's enough for two if you're hungry."

"Would you not like it better hot?"

"Oh, ay, but I cannot weary myself with heating it."

"I will heat it," said the princess, and, rising, she went into the house and made up a fire, which was almost burnt out; then she heated the pie and set the room in order and laid the table and drew a large jug of beer from the cask. Next she placed the arm chair ready for the miller and put the jug by it; then she filled a pipe from the bowl of tobacco and set a cushion in the chair. And all this while she hummed a tune, and from time to time smiled gaily.

Lastly she arranged a chair by the elbow of the miller's, and then she went out and told him that his dinner was ready, and he stumbled to his feet with a sigh of laziness and walked before her into the house.

"May I come?" cried she.

"Ay, there is enough for two," said the miller of Hofbrau without looking round.

So she followed him in. He sank into the armchair and sat there for a moment surveying the room, which was so neat, and the table so daintily laid, and the pie so steaming hot. And he sighed saying:

"It was like this before poor mother died; and he fell to on a great portion of pie with which Osra had piled his plate.

When he had finished eating—which thing did not happen for some time—he held the jug while he took a long draught; then she brought a coal in the tongs and held it while he lit his pipe from it; then she sat down by him, and several moments he puffed and then at last he turned his head and looked at Princess Osra, and she dropped her long lashes and cast down her eyes and next she lifted her eyes and glanced for an instant at the miller; and finally she dropped her eyes again and murmured shyly: "What is it, sir? Why do you look at me?"

"You seem to be a handy wench," observed the miller. "The pie was steaming hot, and yet was not burnt; the beer was well frothed, but not shaken nor thickened; and the pie draws well. Where does your father dwell?"

"He is dead, sir," said the Princess Osra, very demurely.

"And your mother?" pursued the miller.

"She also is dead."

"There is small harm in that," said the miller, thoughtfully; and Osra turned away her head to hide her smile.

"Are you not very lonely, living here all by yourself?" she asked, a moment later.

"Indeed, I have to do everything for myself," said the miller, with a shrug.

"And there is nobody to care for you?"

"No, nor to look after my comfort," said the miller. "Have you any kindred?"

"I have two brothers, sir; but they are married now, and have no need of me."

The miller laid down his pipe and, setting his elbow on the table, faced Princess Osra.

"H'm," said he. "And is it likely you will ride this way again?"

"I may chance to do so," said Osra, and now there was a gleam of malicious triumph in her eyes and she was thinking already how the bracelet would look on her arm.

"Ah!" said the miller, and after a pause he added: "If you do, come half an hour before dinner, and you can lend a hand in making it ready. Where did you get those fine clothes?"

"My mistress gave them to me," answered Osra. "She has cast them off."

"And that horse you rode?"

"It is my master's. I have it to ride when I do my mistress' errands."

"And will your master and mistress do anything for you if you leave their service?"

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"Indeed, I do not see how you are going to excuse yourself to him," he laughed.

"A purse of 500 crowns must do that office for me," said she.

"What, will crowns patch a broken heart?"

"His broken heart must heal itself, as men's broken hearts do, brother."

"In truth, sister, I have known them

a great officer came riding posthaste from Streslau to take the king's commands on high matters of state; and although Rudolf was sorely put out of temper by this untoward interruption, yet he had no alternative but to transact the business before he rode to the miller's at Hofbrau. So he sat fretting and fuming while long papers were read to him, and the princess walked up and down the length of the drawbridge fretting also, for before the king could escape from his affairs the hour of the wedding was already come, and doubtless the miller of Hofbrau was waiting with the priest in the church. And, indeed, it was 1 o'clock or more before Osra and the king set out from Zenda, and they had then a ride of an hour and a half—and all this

yards away, and tied his horse to a tree in a clump by the wayside, and when they came near to the mill he made a circuit and approached from the side, and creeping along the house hid himself behind a large water-butt, which stood just under the window, and from that spot he could hear what passed inside the house, although he could not see. But Osra rode up to the front of the mill, as she had been accustomed to do, and getting down from her horse, walked up to the door. The miller's cart stood in the yard of the mill, but the horse was not in the shafts, and neither the miller nor any body else was to be seen about, and the door of the house was shut.

"He must be waiting at the church," said she. "But I will look in and make sure. Indeed, I feel half afraid to meet him." And her heart was beating rapidly and her face was rather pale, as she walked up to the door, for she feared what the miller might do in the passion of his disappointment on learning who she was and that she could not be his wife.

"I hope the 600 crowns will comfort him," she said, as she laid her hand on the latch of the door; and she sighed—her heart being heavy for the miller, and maybe a little heavy also for the guilt that lay on her conscience for having deceived him.

Now, when she lifted the latch and opened the door, the sight that met her eyes was this: The table was strewn with the remains of a brave dinner; two burnt-out pipes lay beside the plates. A smaller table was in front of the fire; on it stood a very large jug, entirely empty, but bearing signs of having been full not so long ago, and on either side of it, each in an armchair, sat the priest of the village and the miller of Hofbrau, and both of them were sleeping very contentedly and snoring somewhat as they slept. The princess, smitten by remorse at this spectacle, said softly:

"Poor fellow, he grew weary of waiting, and hungry, and was compelled to take his dinner; and, like the kind man he is, he has entertained the priest and kept him here, so that no time should be lost when I arrived. Indeed, I am afraid the poor man loves me very much. Well, miller or lord or prince—they are all the same. Heigh-ho! Why did I deceive him?" And she walked up to the miller's chair and leaned over the back of it, and lightly touched his red cap with her fingers; and he put up his hand and brushed away a fly, as though he brushed away a fly, but gave no other sign of waking.

Then the king called softly, from behind the water-butt under the window:

"Is he there, Osra? Is he there?"

"The poor man has fallen asleep in weariness," she answered. "But the priest is here, ready to marry us. Oh, Rudolf, I am so sorry for what I have done."

At this moment the miller of Hofbrau sat up in his chair and gave a great sneeze, and by this sound the priest also was awakened. Osra came forward and stood between them. The miller looked at her, and then he looked across to the priest and said:

"It is she, father. She has come."

The priest rubbed his hands together, and smiled uncomfortably at Osra.

"We waited two hours," said he, glancing at the clock. "See, it is 3 o'clock now."

"I am sorry you waited so long," said Osra, but I could not come before. And—now that I am come, I cannot—"

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